

Extra Work: Starring Gary Michael Smith

BY CATE NIELAN, Assistant Editor, *Intercom*

Gary Michael Smith, senior member of STC's Houston chapter, is ready for his close-up.

Or he used to be. A senior documentation specialist with CACI at the Information Technology Center's Research and Technology Park in New Orleans, Louisiana, Gary develops documents for the U.S. Department of Defense/Department of the Navy. But in his former career, Gary served as an extra in two television pilots. His work includes *Sweet Justice* (1994–95), and *Jake Lassiter: Justice on the Bayou* (1995).

Gary got started as an extra while working on his MFA in TV video and film production at the University of New Orleans. Wanting to see what it was like on the other side of the camera, Gary listed with an employment agency that placed locals in productions filmed in New Orleans. In *Sweet Justice*, a courtroom drama starring Melissa Gilbert,



Ronnie Cox, and Cecily Tyson, Gary can be seen sitting behind Gilbert in the courtroom gallery. In *Jake Lassiter*, starring Gerald McRaney, Gary played both a lawyer and a pedestrian. "I seem to get typecast as a lawyer," he laughs. "I've been

told it's because I've got nice suits."

Gary describes his work as a film extra as an easy gig, if a little dull. He got paid \$50 a day to be on set for twelve hours—during which time, he says, he "worked" only about twenty minutes. He doesn't describe his work on *Jake Lassiter* as exactly an exercise in character development: For a scene in which a group celebrated Jake's promotion to senior partner, Gary says, "Basically, I lifted a glass of champagne, and grunted and cheered."

Reflecting the culinary bias of his hometown, Gary is more interested in getting a bite than getting the spotlight: He says he'll return to the small screen only if he gets

"discovered" in the Paramount Studios commissary. These days, Gary hires actors rather than acting for hire: Six of his creative nonfiction essays-turned-monologues have been produced at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans.

While he no longer works in film, Gary's hardly behind the scenes. Gary works fulltime at CACI, writes freelance articles and creative nonfiction, teaches small press publishing, at the University of New Orleans, and writes books on subjects as diverse as driving etiquette and the history of coffeehouses, which he publishes through his own press, Chatgris Press (www.chatgrispress.com). Another press in New Orleans will put out his latest book, which tackles the book publishing industry. In his downtime, Gary rides his vintage motorcycle, rollerblades with the Crescent City Skaters (an inline skating group he founded), and is a member of the Louisiana satellite of STC's Houston chapter. He's simply too busy for *Sunset Boulevard*.